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# US Public Diplomacy: Waiting for the War of Ideas

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**Editorial Abstract:** Commander Henderson analyzes current US Public Diplomacy organizations, actions, and levels of support. He concludes that contemporary efforts lack the “critical mass” needed for successful US messaging in the War on Terror, then recommends revised government and commercial constructs to address these shortcomings.

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 demonstrated that public diplomacy was the “weakest link” in our foreign policy arsenal. Americans were astonished by the wide scale of Usama Bin Laden’s popular support among Muslims. Media coverage of anti-American activities since 2001 underscores Al Qaeda’s strategic message. “Why do they hate us?” is still a common headline.

While the US information response to 9/11 appeared halting and confusing, subsequent military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were anything but. Both operations have put the Defense Department at the center of public diplomacy. Both campaigns, marked by lengthy post-combat phases, make plain that military power alone is insufficient to defeat a shadowy, nihilistic and implacable global terror network—whose world view is spreading. The multi-layered insurgency in Iraq is ground center in the War on Terror. Muslims, by contrast, see a historic movement of Islamic restoration and renewal. This broader Islamist movement has millions of adherents, of which radical fighters are only a fraction, that share a common goal of removing what are termed “apostate” regimes. The belief that their governments are “unfaithful to Islam”, that “Islam is the answer”, that the “West has declared war on Islam” are long-standing themes that resonate in Muslim discourse.

Al Qaeda leaders acknowledge much of their fight will occur on the “battlefield of the media.” Modern technologies speed information delivery, in turn changing information dynamics across the globe. Digital convergence of audio, visual and print media impose a form of global transparency. Tactical events rapidly elevate to strategic significance. Governments, Arab ones in particular, no longer control the flow of information. Public diplomacy messages must vie for attention. Credibility and agility matter.

US public diplomacy (PD) has come under intense scrutiny over recent years. A host of studies conclude that public diplomacy is in crisis, and suffers from lack of strategic direction, leadership gaps, insufficient resources and ineffective coordination. Some suggest America’s image problem is linked to perceived double standards in its policies.

Muslim public opinion of the US remains at disturbing lows worldwide, making it difficult for the US to gain international cooperation on counterterrorism initiatives. Still, the US must ensure that Muslim societies have access to democratic ideas and values, which hold great appeal. We can identify progress, especially in international broadcasting. However, more could



*Traditional “around the table”  
Public Diplomacy. (Defense Link)*

be done to restore “critical mass” in public diplomacy; to use private sector talents; and to better integrate information operations, psychological operations, and civil affairs.

This article argues that US public diplomacy has not enhanced post-9/11 national security, nor has yet to fully engage in the battle of ideas. It traces declines in public diplomacy capability since the end of the Cold War, and responses to 9/11. Taken together, recommendations in this examination would optimize interagency support to time-sensitive planning and countering ideological support to terrorism—the “War of Ideas.”

The classic definition of public diplomacy comes from the former US Information Agency, which managed the nation’s public diplomacy for over 45 years:

*Public diplomacy seeks to promote the national interest and the national security of the United States through understanding, informing, and influencing foreign publics and broadening dialogue between American citizens and institutions and their counterparts abroad.*

As an art, PD is not the same as public affairs (PA). Public Affairs deal mainly with the press and are reactive, short-term and informative in nature. Public diplomacy is pro-active and covers the whole spectrum of society. PD seeks to change attitudes, persuade target audiences as well as to inform. The emphasis on proactive persuasion makes PD similar to psychological operations. Timeframes can range from hours to decades to achieve success, but one should view PD as long-run effort requiring consistent application.

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## Instruments of Public Diplomacy: The Tools of Engagement

The basic instruments of public diplomacy are:

1. International information activities;
2. Education and cultural exchanges;
3. International broadcasting.

International information activities include a mix of strategic communication (SC) products and services, designed to “inform, engage and influence” key international target audiences and to provide localized context for US messages. These activities include news, publications, lectures, workshops, overseas information resource centers as well as foreign press centers.

Education and cultural exchanges comprise what former USIA Director Edward R. Murrow, termed as the “last three feet” of public diplomacy. International academic, professional and military exchanges build personal and institutional relationships and are powerful long-term instruments of foreign relations. They break down barriers, promote dialogue and learning, and enhance mutual understanding between US citizens and people of other countries.

International broadcasting refers to a mix of independently-managed, branded radio, satellite television and Internet services. International broadcasting is the US Government’s largest nonmilitary information dissemination activity. The mission of international broadcasting is promotion of open communication of information and ideas, in support of democracy. By statute, international broadcasters have journalistic independence from the US foreign policy bureaucracy, and must provide balanced and comprehensive news.

Media reaction and opinion research are intelligence functions that can provide measures of effectiveness for public diplomacy. The US State Department houses media and opinion research functions within its Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) and analysis mainly centers on mainstream media. The Open Source Center, including the former Foreign Broadcast Information Service, analyzes foreign print, radio, TV, Web-based, and “gray” literature. Products are also available from US embassies, the Defense Department, CIA, and private pollsters. One continuing problem is that product databases are stove-piped. As one study quoted, “the US often doesn’t know what it knows.”

### Organization of Public Diplomacy: Department of State

The present bureaucracy for PD resulted from the *Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998*. That legislation abolished the former United States Information Agency (USIA) and merged its functions and resources within the State Department. Most USIA functions transitioned to the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs (US PD/PA) on 1 October 1999. Four entities now report to the US PD/PA:

1. The Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP) has the mission to “inform, engage, and influence international

audiences” about US policy. IIP provides news articles, electronic and print publications and information programs. IIP conducts strategic planning for public diplomacy efforts.

2. The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) has the mission to foster “mutual understanding” between the US and other countries through international educational and training programs. ECA activities include: Fulbright fellowships; US studies programs; English teaching programs; and exchange grants for professional, cultural and youth programs.

3. The Bureau of Public Affairs (PA) has a mandate to “inform the American people” and feed their concerns back to the policymakers. PA provides briefings for domestic and foreign press corps; media outreach and town hall meetings. PA retained two USA capabilities: (1) foreign press centers (located in Washington, New York, and Los Angeles); and (2) American Embassy TV which transmits news and events to US embassies and international broadcast services.

4. The Office of Policy, Planning and Resources for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs (PPR) will provide long-term strategic planning and performance measurement capability for public diplomacy and public affairs programs. PPR advises the Under Secretary on resource allocation and will coordinate the State Department’s PD presence in the interagency.

Regional bureaus are the traditional power centers within the State Department, and these inherited the staffs and funding lines from former USIA regional bureaus and field operations. While this achieved nominal integration between PD and foreign policy, in practice PD priorities get diluted in the mix of individual bureau interests. The regional bureaus control most of the budget for information programs, and have often pursued separate, disconnected regional PD strategies.

### Broadcasting Board of Governors

The *International Broadcasting Act of 1994* consolidated all non-military US international broadcasting under a part-time, bipartisan Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG). The eight member BBG, appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate, draws from prominent citizens in the media, mass communications and foreign affairs fields. The Secretary of State serves as a non-voting member and is represented by the US PD/PA. As a result of the Foreign Affairs and Restructuring Act, BBG became the independent federal agency responsible for all US government and government sponsored, non-military, international broadcasting. The mix of services managed by the BBG includes:

*Voice of America* (VOA) is the official US international broadcasting service. VOA broadcasts news content via radio, television and Internet formats in 44 languages reaching over 90 million listeners.

Regional broadcasters include *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, *Radio Free Asia*, Office of Cuba Broadcasting (*Radio and TV Marti*). The newer services for the Middle East are *Radio Sawa* (Arabic for “Together”), *Al-Hurrah* (Arabic for “The Free One”) satellite television, and *Radio Farda* (Persian for “Tomorrow”).

The International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB), established by the *International Broadcasting Act of 1994*, is the engineering arm of the BBG. This bureau maintains a global network of domestic and overseas transmitting stations, including owned and leased facilities, plus a satellite network and an Internet delivery system. IBB places programming through media outlets, and produces daily editorials for VOA services.

### Department of Defense

Theater security engagement efforts in connection with the WOT have pushed the DOD to the forefront of public diplomacy. Military support to public diplomacy (MSPD) can encompass military-to-military training and exercise programs, military exchanges, humanitarian and civic assistance, along with information activities. Key events in this arena involve:

1. Public Affairs: During Operation Iraqi Freedom, the journalist-embed program was enormously successful in countering enemy propaganda by providing unfiltered views of combat events on the ground. Joint Combat Camera is a powerful resource consisting of task-organized, service equipped capabilities to provide still imagery and motion video in support of wartime operations, contingencies, and joint exercises. The Joint Public Affairs Support Element is an experimental unit providing deployable PA support.

2. Information Operations (IO): As DOD IO lead, US Strategic Command reorganized in 2004 to facilitate access to joint component support for network warfare and IO planning. The Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence was designated the Principal Advisor to the Secretary of Defense for IO in 2003.

3. Military Support to Public Diplomacy (MSPD): Pursuant to the October 2003 DOD *IO Roadmap*, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs assumed responsibility for MSPD, in addition to its legacy responsibilities for policy coordination and regional planning. [Editor's note: term later replaced by "Defense Support to Public Diplomacy"]

4. Psychological Operations (PSYOP): The US Special Operations Command established the Joint PSYOP Support Element (JPSE) in 2003 to plan, coordinate, and integrate trans-regional PSYOP to promote US objectives. JPSE sponsored two trans-regional PSYOP initiatives aimed at reinforcing US country teams' ability to assist selected host nations. Specifically, these helped exercise better control over territory used as potential terrorist safe havens. The first, an Advanced Concept Technology Demonstration, focused on disseminating information in denied areas. Secondly, the MC-130E Commando Solo special mission aircraft, capable of broadcasting radio and color TV in all worldwide standards, flew periodic missions in support of the Office of Cuba Broadcasting.

### US Agency for International Development

USAID is a low-profile agency that has also been pushed to the frontlines in the WOT. Foreign assistance is a key component of the *National Security Strategy of the United*



Radio Sawa studios.

(Broadcasting Board of Governors)

*States.* USAID humanitarian affairs and development programs arguably represent public diplomacy at its best. USAID generates goodwill by: building schools; restoring mosques; funding media training; providing disaster relief; and has instituted a product branding initiative.

### Public Diplomacy and National Security: Wars and Ideas

In the *National Security Strategy of the United States*, President Bush conveyed the necessity of refocusing public diplomacy to combat radical extremist ideological threats:

*Just as our diplomatic institutions must adapt so that we can reach out to others, we also need a different and more comprehensive approach to public information efforts that can help people around the world learn about and understand America. The War on Terror is not a clash of civilizations. It does, however, reveal the clash inside a civilization, a battle for the future of the Muslim world. This is a struggle of ideas—an area where America must excel.*

Unfortunately, the US has yet to excel in the struggle for ideas. What the United States terms a global war on terror, Muslims by contrast see as a historic movement of Islamic renewal. This broader Islamist movement has millions of adherents, both political and militant; radical fighters are only a fraction. The overarching political goal is the removal of what Islamists call the "apostate" regimes to include: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Jordan, and the Gulf states. The perception of US support for tyrannies in the Muslim world is a critical public diplomacy vulnerability—one that strongly undercuts US credibility.

Political Islamist movements also reflect Muslim resentments with autocratic governance, rampant youth unemployment and declining living standards. The belief that their governments are "unfaithful to Islam," that "Islam is the answer," and the "West has declared war on Islam," are long-standing themes that resonate in Muslim popular imagination. In Iraq, many Arabs perceive that Muslim lands are being re-colonized. In Europe, mosques teach alienated and angry Muslim youth that they live in the "Dar Al Harb" (Realm of War).

Global terrorist propaganda callously exploits Muslim feelings of humiliation, and inspire others to fight in so-called “fields of jihad.” For now, Al Qaeda sees Iraq as the principal battleground, and its suicide bomber network is the most dangerous component of an adaptive multi-layered insurgency. The AQ-Iraq efforts aim to create a psychological climate of insecurity, undermine domestic and foreign support for the Coalition, and divide Iraqis. Public diplomacy must seize every opportunity to de-legitimize these extremist networks.

Tactical events can rapidly elevate to strategic significance. Governments, Arab ones in particular, no longer control information, and must vie for credibility. In information-saturated environments, getting attention and achieving resonance is as important as getting information out. The swift public release of the intercepted Al Qaeda leaders’ communications—the Zawahiri letter to Al Zarqawi in October 2005—provides a tactical exemplar.

### Public Diplomacy: Lack of Critical Mass

From 1953 until its dissolution in 1999, the US government’s tools of public diplomacy were resident in the former United States Information Agency (USIA). The agency consolidated the government’s tools of influence into a single entity that reported to the President, while taking foreign policy guidance from the Secretary of State. The decision to create an independent agency to counter Soviet propaganda fit the times, as well as State Department inclination to separate statecraft and propaganda functions, but also reflected a realization that traditional diplomacy was insufficient to meet Cold War ideological threats. Over its 46 history, the small yet nimble USIA played a triumphal role in getting the truth into closed societies.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, USIA suffered declining interest from a White House and Congress that were anxious for a post-Cold War “peace dividend.” During the 1990s, USIA budgets were slashed, resulting in regional program cuts in places like the Middle East and Indonesia which are now a priority. By 1999 the agency was dismantled and its functions dispersed throughout the State Department. While the merger had the effect of nominally integrating public diplomacy into State Department policy functions, it also had the effect of reducing *critical mass* for public diplomacy. Funding for public diplomacy continued to decline and bottomed out in the year 2000.

In retrospect, PD should remain within State Department, retaining a position to both influence, and explain foreign policies. But to be truly successful, public diplomacy functions should also be re-assembled under direct US PD/PA authority. The current fragmented structure lacks the responsiveness for unified action.

### Tactical Expedients... Strategic Imperatives

News coverage of the 9/11 attacks made plain just how weak public diplomacy had become. Non-stop visuals carried across the globe of commercial airliners crashing into the World Trade Center, followed by Usama Bin Laden’s pre-recorded video, along with media coverage of anti-American demonstrations. All of these actions served to advance Al Qaeda’s strategic message, and eventually inspire a like-minded worldwide movement. The US public diplomacy response was halting and confusing. “Why do they hate us?” became a common headline. The need to repair America’s image problem led the State Department to bring in a former advertising executive, Charlotte Beers, for the post of US PD/PA. Ms Beers conceived a “Shared Values” initiative featuring a series of mini-documentaries on Muslim life in America. The programs reached an estimated audience of 288 million, but were widely criticized by Muslim viewers as ‘simplistic propaganda.’ Other efforts included US officials making regular appearances on pan-Arab TV services, and the recall to service of Retired Ambassador and fluent Arabic speaker, Chris Ross, to engage Arab media.

The US has made several attempts to improve public diplomacy coordination at the strategic level, yet most are now dormant. Building on the Coalition Information Center model, which proved successful in managing news cycles in Afghanistan operations, the White House created the Office of Global Communication in early 2003. While this organization had wide responsibilities for interagency coordination on messages to foreign audiences, in practice OGC mainly focused on tactical production of daily talking points—not all of which focused on counter-terrorism issues. Within DOD, the short-lived Office of Strategic Influence (OSI) was designed to provide

information policy options and coordinate long-term influence programs for countering hostile propaganda, disinformation and misinformation directed against the US from foreign sources. The OSI experience points to lingering bureaucratic sensitivities that continue to impede strategic-level integration of PA, IO, and PSYOP disciplines.

Following OSI’s demise, the National Security Council (NSC) launched two Policy Coordination Committees (PCCs) in 2002: one for Strategic Communication; and one for Counter-Terrorism Information Strategy. The Strategic Communication PCC (SC PCC) was chartered to ensure coordinated interagency support for international broadcasting, foreign information programs and public diplomacy, and to produce a National Information Strategy. This PCC convened few meetings. The Information Strategy PCC (IS PCC) was established by classified memorandum to coordinate the information strategy component of the War on Terror. The IS PCC was a leading



*Who is enabling new PD  
messaging capabilities?  
(Wiki Media)*

contributor to strategic communication during Operation Iraqi Freedom, but it was disbanded in early 2005 with the advent of the National Counter-Terrorism Center. A Muslim World Outreach (MWO) PCC was created in July 2004, replacing the former Strategic Communications PCC. Based on input from US embassies in the Middle East, the MWO PCC did develop a strategic plan and white paper.

Yet PCCs are part-time efforts, neither fully resourced nor empowered for their charters, and still lack authority to levy direct tasking on military IO capabilities. The US needs a focused Interagency Secretariat. Seven years have passed since 9/11, and there is no national PD strategy. However, US DP/DA has identified three new strategic “imperatives”: (1) encouraging freedoms; (2) isolating violent extremists; and (3) fostering shared values.

### **Public Diplomacy Outlays: Less Bang... Same Buck**

Through the early 2000s, annual spending for State Department information programs and US international broadcasting was approximately US \$1.2 billion. This amounts to one-quarter of one percent of the military budget, not much more than what the DOD spends in a single day. Many reviews pointedly ask whether a military budget 400 times greater than a public diplomacy budget is adequate to US national security strategy, and to a war on terrorism viewed as a struggle about ideas?

Yet in the absence of a national PD strategy that sets forth clear strategic priorities and baselines for success, it is far from clear how extra spending would improve overall performance. Thus far, Congress has passed modest increases in funding. Yet the 2004 public diplomacy budget, in nominal terms, was not much higher than its 1999 levels.

However, the composition of spending on the major of instruments of public diplomacy has changed. In fiscal year 2004, well over half of the PD budget went to international broadcasting, at just under US \$600 million. The newer Middle East-oriented services (*Sawa* and *Al Hurra*) were nearly \$89 million. Appropriations for educational and cultural exchanges had increased from \$200 million (in 1999) to slightly under \$316 million in 2004. Spending on international information programs (approximately \$305 million), however, is far below former 1990’s USIA levels; and most of this (over 75%) goes to the regional bureaus.

Surely the US should spend more to use the talents of the private sector in areas of communications, cultural and opinion research. One tool for doing this is creation of a tax-exempt Corporation for Public Diplomacy, able to offer grants to independent or indigenous media. Similarly, a Center for Strategic Communication is another concept for conducting media opinion and research; developing themes, products and programs; and deploying advisory teams.

### **Muslim Public Opinion**

Anti-US sentiment among Muslims bottomed-out during the height of the Iraq War, with nowhere to go but up. According

to the Pew Global Attitudes Project, US favorability ratings increased significantly in Lebanon, Jordan, and Morocco, and identifiably in Pakistan and Turkey. The Pew survey found declining support for terrorist violence against civilians due in part to perceptions of Islamic extremism as an internal threat. Terrorist attacks in Jordan fueled a sharp reaction against Al Qaeda. Other signs of backlash point to less flattering, even cartoonish portrayals of extremists in Muslim media.

Pew data also reveals broad and consistent support for democracy among a predominantly Muslim public. Pew surveys since 2002 uncovered widespread support “for specific features of a democratic system, such as the right to criticize the government; honest, multiparty elections; a fair judiciary; and a free, independent media.” Despite widespread distrust of America among Muslims, many believe the US wants to see their region move toward democracy. Majorities in Morocco and Lebanon believed the US is backing democracy in their countries.

Current public diplomacy efforts may bear some credit for these results, but it is not clear how much. AC Nielsen surveys indicate *Radio Sawa* has country market shares ranging from 27 to 73 percent across the Middle East for listeners aged 15 and higher. *Al Hurra TV* has country shares ranging from 7 to 46 percent of those households having satellite TV access. Nielson surveys indicate very high news reliability ratings from listeners. BBG’s Chairman noted that *Radio Sawa* is the most popular radio station in Morocco, the country having the highest US favorability ratings; but Morocco has already been on a gradual path of political reform.

Nonetheless, Pew polls also indicate continued widespread Muslim opposition to the US-led WOT. Muslim perceptions of US policy still matter a great deal—and have not fundamentally changed.

### **Waiting for the War of Ideas**

Years after 9/11, we are still waiting for public diplomacy to fully engage in the battle of ideas. The merger of the former USIA into the State Department provided needed integration of foreign policy and public diplomacy. However, the present public diplomacy infrastructure lacks the mass, flexibility, and responsiveness it enjoyed when managed under an independent agency.

Policy coordination committees perhaps should give way to more focused interagency coordination efforts that can meaningfully direct resources and tasking. Tactical expedients to date lack a broader strategic framework. A unified public diplomacy strategy that identifies priorities and baselines for success would rationalize outlays and future investment.

The newer international broadcasting services have made gradual gains in building audience share and credibility. Still, perceptions of policy matter and Muslim opposition to the US-led WOT remains widespread. However, democratic values and freedoms hold wide appeal among Muslim audiences, and these present opportunities for public diplomacy.

The strategic imperative to “marginalize and isolate” violent extremists, who are part of a broader movement of Islamic restoration, will require considerable finesse, resourcefulness, and cultural awareness. The US must amplify and grant political space to Muslim voices, particularly those who advocate tolerance, democratic reform, and modernity. This task lies at the heart of the War of Ideas.

### **Recommendations: Educate, Engage, Exchange and Empower**

Al Qaeda leaders admit that half of their struggle is “in the battlefield of the media.” Radical extremist mass communication has become more sophisticated, as evidenced by an array of e-jihad websites, studio quality videos, interactive media, and now a webcast called “Voice of the Caliphate.” US public diplomacy must become no less inventive.

In recent speeches, the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs articulated four public diplomacy tactics: “Educate,” “Engage,” “Exchange,” and “Empower.” We can leverage this framework to summarize PD recommendations, with emphasis on national security issues in context of the WOT.

#### **Educate: Promulgate A New Presidential Decision Directive (PDD) on Public Diplomacy**

This new directive would identify the roles and contributions of public affairs, information operations and psychological operations within public diplomacy. Notably, it should establish horizontal coordination and review mechanisms. This new public diplomacy effort should update and supersede NSDD-77 (*Management of Public Diplomacy Relative to National Security*) and PDD-68 (*International Public Information*). This directive should make a re-engineered US PD/PA the center of gravity for coordinating US government wide public diplomacy efforts.

#### **Engage: Establish an Public Diplomacy Interagency Secretariat**

The aforementioned PDD should establish a focused, senior-level Interagency Secretariat to plan, direct coordinate and monitor public diplomacy and supporting information activities across the US Government. This Secretariat should also have a supporting standing fusion cell or joint interagency task force, optimized to support time sensitive planning. Such a center would facilitate coordination of Combatant Command strategic communication efforts in connection with WOT operations, and would enhance responses against fleeting terrorist targets.

#### **Exchange: Leverage Private Sector Expertise and Talent**

The US could surely do much more to use the talents of the vast private sector in areas of media,

communications, cultural and opinion research. One model suggested by the Council for Foreign Relations is a Corporation for Public Diplomacy, to provide grants to independent and indigenous media projects. It would function much like the Corporation for Public Broadcasting; its programming would be removed from direct association with the US Government and would perhaps be seen as less “radioactive.” Another concept suggested by the Defense Science Board would be a Center for Strategic Communication to conduct media opinion and research; develop themes, products and programs; and deploy advisory teams. It would function in a manner similar to the Rand Corporation. Both capabilities would help unleash private sector creative potential, and most would agree such assets are worth having in the long-run battle of ideas.

#### **Empower: Restore Critical Mass in Public Diplomacy**

The Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy is the national focal point for Public Diplomacy; however, the position has nothing close to the span of control and budget authority enjoyed by former USIA directors. It’s time to re-engineer critical mass by granting US PD/PA full control of the public diplomacy budget. In addition, US PD/PA should promulgate a national public diplomacy strategy that rationalizes investment and connects disparate regional PD strategies. Recent moves to elevate senior PD officers in the regional bureaus seem promising. Ideally, regional PD staff and field officers should be wholly under the operational control of US PD/PA. This effort could attain even more mass by transferring media reaction and opinion analysis functions from INR back to the US PD/PA. Media analysis needs to widen beyond elite and mainstream press, to include influential political Islamist and extremist outlets—especially if public diplomacy is to “marginalize and isolate” extremist threats. Until then, the war of ideas waits. 